

Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole #culturalenquiry2019

Headlines from first round table: Technology & the Arts February 26th 2019, Pavilion Dance South West

Our first round-table discussion on an unseasonably sunny afternoon was attended by over 30 people - including representatives from business, culture, universities and the public sector. The discussion was run by Dick Penny, formerly the Chief Executive of Watershed in Bristol.

The key points were as follows:

Opening words from Zannah Doan, Chief executive of Pavilion Dance South West on how they have pioneered the use of technology with dance. This includes developing an app which aimed to help democratise dance by letting people easily capture their own dancing - however this had issues with scalability, a common challenge for the arts: *'Opportunities are boundless, dance loves technology - but we lack some of the expertise.'* Sustainability and ongoing funding are also an issue they have encountered alongside user evaluation. The main learning for them from partnership working is that universities and arts organisations have very different timelines.

Professor Mary Oliver from Arts University Bournemouth spoke on the barriers to creativity in BCP, including the lack of available properties in the hands of councils, which means that it can't evolve in the same way as a Bristol or Manchester. She believes the strength of the new council and the two universities can play a big role in shaping a more creative future.



Opportunities for young people

Dick Penny then shifted onto young people- *'How do we create somewhere attractive for young people? Bristol has become a self-generating magnet for young people - because there is a feeling that things can be done or started. it is an attitude.'*

In discussion there was talk of 'brain drain', hiring challenges, skills shortages in tech (something faced across the UK). *"20 years ago, we would get lots of CVs but now recruitment is getting harder. people attracted to more culturally dynamic places. Soul destroying when good candidates don't see the strengths."*

There was a feeling from one contributor that London firms cherry picking the top talent from the universities.

As BCP doesn't have the old factories or warehouses it is a struggle to create a Spike Island or large co-working space that can help partnership working and encourage young people to stay. Also, not clear in BCP where you 'belong' as a creative business as it is spread out and then isn't a particular creative quarter – this makes it harder to make stuff happen.

Dick then asked *"How do we make BCP more 'sticky' for young people? A place where they want to hang around"*

As was pointed out Pavilion Dance is a great hub for young people – but it is relatively small and has a specific niche. Equally the Arts by The Sea festival creates great events but only for a short period of time. Can we link up our community hubs better?

"I created a digital museum for New Milton using Minecraft with 15 young people over 9 weeks - they were the hardest workers I have known, working nights and holidays, putting in incredible detail. They got a great day visiting Microsoft. At the beginning they felt it was impossible, but by the end they realised that they could achieve what they wanted. It helped increase their aspirations for the place"

Transport/parking came up (multiple times) as a real barrier and challenge for the area. But to turn around the problem - how we turn the lack of a single urban centre in BCP into an advantage? Could technology and connectivity connect places and events in ways that big cities are already exploring such as through the new City Mapper monthly pass about to launch in London?

Increasingly young people want to participate and not just be passive. they want to experiment and use tools. Cultural spaces can provide more opportunity if they are open and welcoming to young people.

Making the most of BCPs strengths

There was much discussion on creating a new narrative of place – that build on the town's heritage but positioned it firmly in the contemporary:

"We should be celebrating our diverse neighbourhoods - in the same way that San Francisco celebrates its unique areas - would be a start. Maybe we worry about the centre too much when the interesting stuff happens at the fringes."

As Dick said, *"It's all about creating narratives and getting as many people as possible to add to them and shape them. This is where digital tools are useful alongside our physical spaces."*

"Too much culture in Bournemouth is brought in - not enough production. Yes, having large scale receding spaces is great - but miss the Winchester. It used to make projects happen."

"We need to challenge the tourism rhetoric - strengthen the contemporary, cultural and technology messages year-round. Need to shift tourism towards higher value. We are much more than a beach. for young people the beach is just 10% when it comes to retention of young people"

"Bournemouth has number one beach in UK according to local paper today - but we have no beach culture. We need to create a beach culture along with the bars and restaurants. We must not just celebrate 1951. We need to move civic celebration towards younger more dynamic activity."

"Bournemouth was called England's St Tropez by the Times in the early 20th century - if you visit St Tropez's website it is all about culture and the arts. We need to learn from that and change perceptions. It is a young town with a young population."

"Tech never happens in a vacuum. It always has a context which is where the arts come in. Here we have heritage, but we ignored it for years, but the Victorian past has much to tell us. Can we shape new stories using that confidence, innovation and the arts/science crossover which exists here?"

"The challenges Pavilion Dance had in bringing the National Showcase of Dance (coming in May 2019) were linked to people thinking that we were out of the way. We have to change perceptions."

Partnership and resources

In terms of the role for technology and how organisations can facilitate more partnerships Dick told the story of Watershed and how when it started the Pervasive Media Studio (a space for artists, technologists and researchers to work together) it had a simple philosophy – *"If you are using technology for a purpose and bring something to community, are open and interruptible you are welcome."* Furthermore, he made the point that for organisations: *"Being generous is a huge enabler. You have to give before you see something come back."*

Going forward the point was made that resources matter: *"Money is crucial and can't be ignored. We need to see the same seriousness from the council around culture and creativity as there is around tourism."*

We also need *"A communications platform that everyone can feel part of - like the old community radio did - would be really useful so that everyone can find out what is going on."*

New opportunities are continually emerging: *"The changes that are occurring to the high street can be a real opportunity for us as spaces evolve and become available. There is a*

big role the Business Improvement Districts in helping us create new experiences and opportunities for artists."

"Simple lesson from Bristol was the emergence of a noticeboard for creative and tech jobs, which showed that there were lots of opportunities locally and encouraged people to stay and work in the area because they could see they weren't alone."

Audiences are vital

We then looked at audiences as Dick said, *"if we think about audiences - how do arts and tech help to engage people, make them feel that they belong to a place and believe they can co-author and participate in things."*

"We need that mix of the large scale - such as the Pavilion will sell 543,000 tickets a year to a commercial offer - as well as the neighbourhood stuff. The big scale brings visibility but is only part of the ecology."

"Producers need to consider audiences - the one cannot exist without the other. Equally we have to consider food which is a key part of culture. We cannot get stuck on a stale debate about the mainstream and alternative culture."

"Creating a local media channel that connected events, promoted the new identity, provides a platform for artists could be beneficial. But let's build on what is already here such as the local radio but vital we understand who we are targeting and how they engage e.g. is podcasting a long-term model."

"Let us do our research and be clear who we are trying to reach before we create any new platforms. Particularly if we are targeting young people."

Final Words - it must be for everyone

"One of the themes of this enquiry must be around how working together will bring benefits to everyone. The environment has changed over last 20 years Arts University Bournemouth was once almost better known in Berlin than in the area - that is no longer the case."

"We need to make sure the whole is greater than the sum of the parts - which means avoiding fragmentation and balkanization of the cultural and creative sector. This is a great opportunity to ensure that happens. Greater visibility and networks will help encourage people to stay"

"Do we need a new galvanising project - such as those that have helped move Dundee on from its old Journalism, Jute and Jam image - something that can inspire people with a new vision, change perceptions?"

"The town motto of Bournemouth is 'Pulchritudo et Salubritas' beauty and health - a reminder that it has always been lifestyle that has attracted people to live in the area. How do we make the most of that? We need that overarching story."